

The Chain Rule:

$$\frac{d}{dx}(f(g(x))) = f'(g(x)) \cdot g'(x).$$

Example 1. Find the derivative of $y = \sqrt{x^3 + x + 2}$.

(*) $\sqrt{x^3 + x + 2} = f(g(x))$ where $f(u) = \sqrt{u} = u^{1/2}$ and $g(x) = x^3 + x + 2$, so...

$$\frac{d}{dx} \sqrt{x^3 + x + 2} = \frac{d}{dx} (x^3 + x + 2)^{1/2} = \overbrace{\frac{1}{2} (x^3 + x + 2)^{-1/2}}^{f'(g(x))} \cdot \underbrace{(3x^2 + 1)}_{g'(x)}$$

(*) The chain rule can also be expressed as follows. If $y = f(u)$ and $u = g(x)$, then $y = f(g(x))$ and

$$\frac{dy}{dx} = \overbrace{\frac{dy}{du}}^{f'(g(x))} \cdot \overbrace{\frac{du}{dx}}^{g'(x)}$$

Explanation: With $y = f(u)$ and $u = g(x)$, *linear approximation* says that if $\Delta x \approx 0$, then

$$\Delta u = g(x + \Delta x) - g(x) \approx g'(x)\Delta x. \quad (1)$$

Likewise, if $\Delta u \approx 0$, then

$$\Delta y = f(u + \Delta u) - f(u) \approx f'(u)\Delta u. \quad (2)$$

Now, if Δx is close to 0, then ***so is*** Δu (because $g'(x)$ is fixed), so if $\Delta x \approx 0$, then using both approximations (1) and (2) gives

$$\Delta y \approx f'(u)\Delta u \approx f'(u)\overbrace{g'(x)\Delta x}^{\approx \Delta u} = f'(g(x))g'(x)\Delta x,$$

so

$$\frac{\Delta y}{\Delta x} \approx \frac{f'(g(x))g'(x)\cancel{\Delta x}}{\cancel{\Delta x}} = f'(g(x))g'(x).$$

These approximations all becomes more and more accurate as $\Delta x \rightarrow 0$, and therefore

$$\frac{dy}{dx} = \lim_{\Delta x \rightarrow 0} \frac{\Delta y}{\Delta x} = f'(g(x))g'(x).$$

Example 2. Find the point(s) on the graph of $h(x) = (x^2 - 3x - 4)^3$ where the tangent line is horizontal.

(*) We need to find the point(s) where $h'(x) = 0$, which means that we first have to differentiate $h(x)$.

(*) Differentiation: use the chain rule on $h(x) = f(g(x))$, with $f(u) = u^3$ and $g(x) = x^2 - 3x - 4$:

$$h'(x) = \underbrace{3 \overbrace{(x^2 - 3x - 4)^2}^u}_{df/du} \overbrace{(2x - 3)}^{dg/dx}$$

(*) **Recall:** A product $AB = 0$ if and only if $A = 0$ or $B = 0$, so

$$h'(x) = 0 \iff x^2 - 3x - 4 = 0 \text{ or } 2x - 3 = 0$$

and $x^2 - 3x - 4 = (x - 4)(x + 1)$, so $h'(x) = 0$ when $x = -1$, $x = 3/2$ and $x = 4$.

Points on graph: $(-1, 0)$, $(3/2, -244.14)$ and $(4, 0)$.

Differentiating without the chain rule...

$$\begin{aligned}h(x) &= (x^2 - 3x - 4)^3 = (x^2 - 3x - 4)^2(x^2 - 3x - 4) \\&= (x^4 - 6x^3 + x^2 + 24x + 16)(x^2 - 3x - 4) \\&= x^6 - 9x^5 + 15x^4 + 45x^3 - 60x^2 - 144x - 64\end{aligned}$$

So

$$h'(x) = 6x^5 - 45x^4 + 60x^3 + 135x^2 - 120x - 144.$$

Now all we have to do is to solve the equation

$$6x^5 - 45x^4 + 60x^3 + 135x^2 - 120x - 144 = 0...$$

Observation: Using the chain rule in this example has two advantages:

- (*) No messy arithmetic.
- (*) The chain rule gives $h'(x)$ in a (partially) factored form, which makes solving the equation $h'(x) = 0$ is *much* easier.

Example 3. Find the equation of the tangent line to the graph

$$y = \frac{2}{\sqrt[3]{x^2 + 4}}$$

at the point $(2, 1)$.

We can use the quotient rule combined with the chain rule to find the derivative dy/dx , or we can just use the chain rule and the observation that

$$\begin{aligned} y &= \frac{2}{\sqrt[3]{x^2 + 4}} = 2(x^2 + 4)^{-1/3} \\ \implies \frac{dy}{dx} &= 2 \cdot \left(-\frac{1}{3}\right) (x^2 + 4)^{-4/3} \cdot (2x) = -\frac{4x}{3} (x^2 + 4)^{-4/3} \\ \implies \left. \frac{dy}{dx} \right|_{x=2} &= -\frac{8}{3} \cdot 8^{-4/3} = -\frac{1}{6}. \end{aligned}$$

Now we use the point-slope formula to find the equation of the tangent line:

$$y - 1 = -\frac{1}{6}(x - 2) \implies y = 1 - \frac{1}{6}(x - 2) \quad \left(\text{or } y = \frac{4}{3} - \frac{x}{6} \right)$$

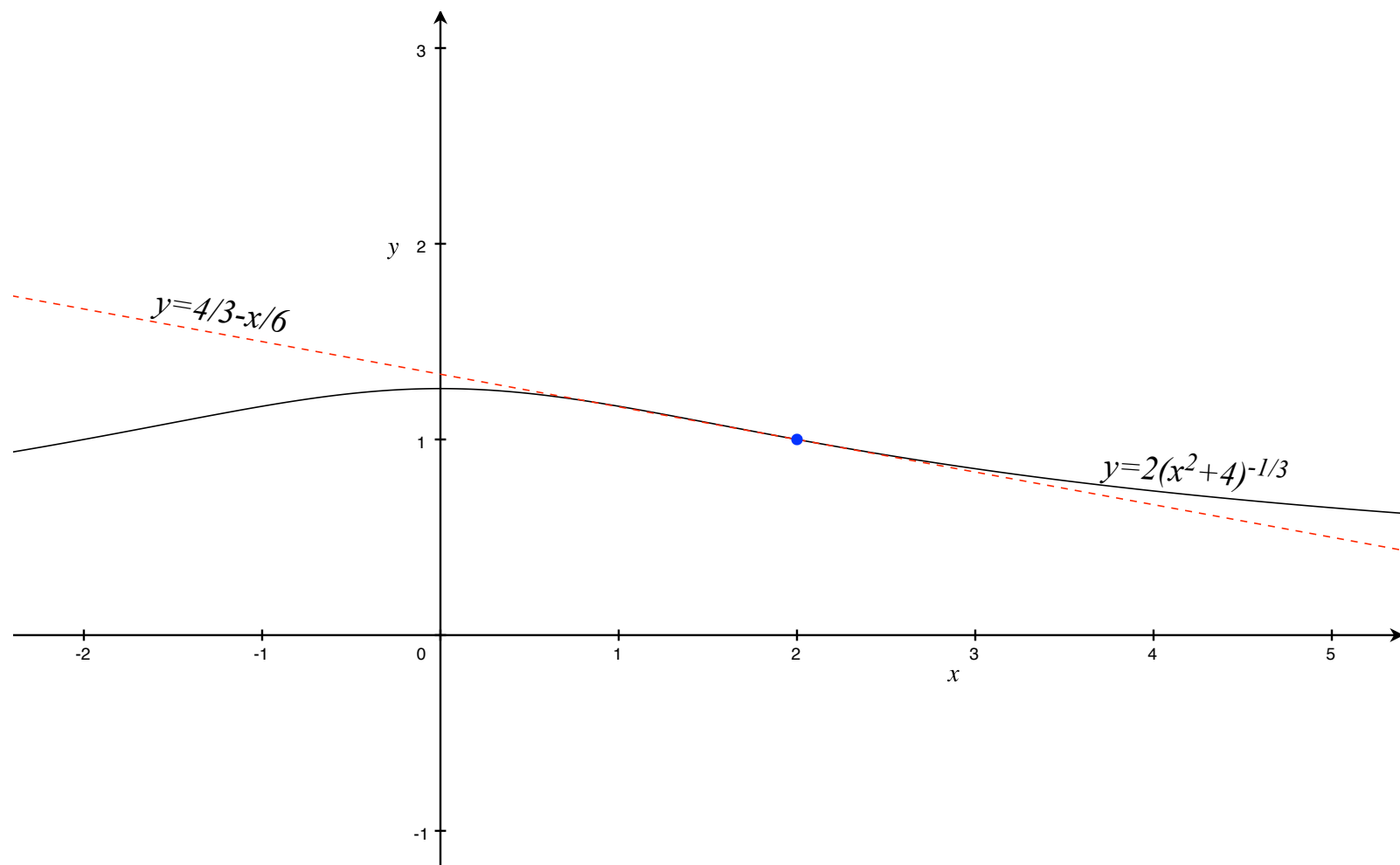


Figure 1: The graphs of $y = 2(x^2 + 4)^{-1/3}$ and the tangent line at $(2, 1)$.

Observation: $f(x)/g(x) = f(x)g(x)^{-1}$, so...

$$\frac{d}{dx} \left(\frac{f(x)}{g(x)} \right) = \frac{d}{dx} (f(x)g(x)^{-1})$$

$$= f'(x)g(x)^{-1} + f(x) \frac{d}{dx} (g(x)^{-1})$$

$$= f'(x)g(x)^{-1} + f(x) ((-1)g(x)^{-2}g'(x))$$

$$= \frac{f'(x)}{g(x)} - \frac{f(x)g'(x)}{g(x)^2} = \frac{f'(x)g(x) - f(x)g'(x)}{g(x)^2}$$

I.e., the quotient rule follows from combining the product rule and chain rule.

Example 4. Find the derivative of $f(x) = 3x\sqrt{x^2 + 1}$.

$$\begin{aligned} f'(x) &= \overbrace{(3x)'(x^2 + 1)^{1/2} + 3x \left((x^2 + 1)^{1/2} \right)'}^{\text{product rule}} \\ &= 3(x^2 + 1)^{1/2} + 3x \underbrace{\left(\frac{1}{2}(x^2 + 1)^{-1/2} \cdot 2x \right)}_{\text{chain rule}} \\ &= 3(x^2 + 1)^{1/2} + 3x^2(x^2 + 1)^{-1/2} \\ &= \frac{6x^2 + 3}{\sqrt{x^2 + 1}} \end{aligned}$$

Marginal revenue product.

(*) A firm's revenue function is $r = f(q)$ (where q is output).

(*) The firm's production function is $q = g(l)$ (where l is labor input).

(*) It follows that revenue is a function of labor input:

$$r = f(g(l)).$$

(*) The derivative dr/dl is called the firm's *marginal revenue product*.

(*) By the chain rule

$$\frac{dr}{dl} = \frac{dr}{dq} \cdot \frac{dq}{dl},$$

i.e.,

marginal revenue product = (marginal revenue) $\times$ (marginal product).

Example 5: The revenue function for a firm's product is

$$r = 20q - 0.4q^2$$

and the firm's production function is

$$q = 5\sqrt{3\ell - 14}.$$

(*) Monthly revenue, r , is measured in \$1000s.

(*) Monthly output, q , is measured in 1000s of units.

(*) Labor input, ℓ , is measured in \$1000s per week

(*) Current labor input: $\ell_0 = 10$.

Firm is considering the hiring of a widget polisher who will cost (wages, benefits and taxes) \$500 a week. How will this affect their bottom line?

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Firm is considering the hiring of a widget polisher who will cost (wages, benefits and taxes) \$500 a week. How will this affect their bottom line?

(*) Current output and revenue: $q_0 = 5\sqrt{30 - 14} = 20$

and $r_0 = 20 \cdot 20 - 0.4 \cdot 20^2 = 240$